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Steps Weighed to Limit Disclosure of Secrets

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WASHINGTON, May 25 — The Reagan Administration is considering reducing the number of officials with access to classified documents as part of a broad effort to control the unauthorized disclosure of sensitive national security information, Administration sources said today.

The sources said that the Administration was also considering reducing the amount of information that falls within the classified category in the hope that it will then be easier to monitor those documents and thus prevent their unauthorized disclosure.

The proposals are contained in a memorandum prepared by middle-level Administration intelligence officials for review at a meeting this week of President Reagan's top national security advisers, the sources said. It has been presented to Adm. John M. Poindexter, Mr. Reagan's national security adviser, they said.

This most recent study of unauthorized disclosures was undertaken at the direction of senior White House officials in response to their increasing concern that efforts to control such disclosures have been largely unsuccessful.

Other recommendations in the memorandum include an increase in the use of polygraph tests. A similar policy proposed in a security directive Mr. Reagan signed Nov. 1 drew a sharp protest from Secretary of State George P. Shultz.

A senior White House official said that some intelligence officials in the Government believed that such agencies as the Department of Defense and the Central Intelligence Agency were administering polygraph tests adequately, while such others as the State Department were not. The memorandum suggests that the tests be used uniformly, the official said.

The proposals contained in the

memorandum all relate to curbs and other steps that would be taken within the Administration, the sources said, and do not include recommendations for new restrictions on news organizations.

But the sources said that the Administration officials regarded the problem of unauthorized disclosures as requiring a "dual track" solution in which efforts would be made to convince news organizations not to report information that jeopardizes national security. They said this would mainly be accomplished by calling upon the media to display more "responsibility" and would be used on a "case-by-case basis."

White House officials had said Friday in announcing that efforts were underway to find new ways to prevent disclosures that the examination was being conducted only to prevent the disclosure of sensitive national security information and not unflattering stories about the Administration.

The irritation over unauthorized disclosures to the news media is not unique to the Reagan Administration. Mr. Reagan's predecessors were at one time or another exercised over unauthorized disclosures and moved to prevent them.

Another proposal urged by the middle-level group calls for an expanded role by the Federal Bureau of Investigation in examining unauthorized disclosures. While the bureau already investigates suspected breaches of espionage laws, the sources said that the memorandum suggests creating a special bureau unit to examine unauthorized disclosures.

The senior White House official who discussed the policy on polygraph tests said that a special F.B.I. unit would have to be approved by Mr. Reagan and other senior officials.

Looking for Discipline

The sources said that the recommendations were part of an attempt to generate what one called "more discipline" in the Administration in the hope of ending the disclosures of classified information that officials have asserted threaten national security.

Several recommendations could be put into effect by Mr. Reagan through executive orders: cutting the number of officials with access to classified material, broadening the use of polygraph tests and setting up a new F.B.I. unit.

The memorandum is to be considered by a group that includes Mr. Shultz, Defense Secretary Caspar W. Weinberger, William J. Casey, the Director of Central Intelligence, Lieut. Gen. William Odom, the head of the National Security Agency, and Donald T. Regan, the White House chief of staff.

One source stressed that other meetings of this group might have to be held before final recommendations go to Mr. Reagan.

Another White House official said that the thrust of the recommendations were for a more "aggressive" posture by the Administration in trying to curb unauthorized national security leaks. The official said such disclosures had become a major concern within the Administration in recent months because of intelligence disclosures connected with Libya and reports about a classified intelligence operation involving American submarines. Reports on the latter have surfaced in connection with the trial of Ronald W. Pelton, a former National Security Agency employee, who is accused of spying for the Soviet Union.

"We have got a situation where people at lower levels have starting blabbing in an irresponsible way," the official said. "It is a hindrance in the conduct of foreign policy as well as limiting the President's options."

Looking for Disclosures

The officials described the memorandum as reflecting a "more aggressive" posture in combatting leaks. It urges measures that could make it easier to identify officials who might engage in such practices, they said, including the proposal to reduce the number of employees with access to sensitive documents as well as reducing the amount of material in such a category.

The recommendation on reducing the number of employees with access to classified information is similar, but broader, than efforts taken last June by the Defense Department in the wake of several espionage cases, including one that centered on John A. Walker Jr., a retired Navy warrants officer, who has pleaded guilty to espionage charges. In June, the number of officials cleared to handle secret documents at the Defense Department, more than 4.3 million, was cut by 10 percent.

Some of the recommended measures, such as the use of polygraph tests, have also been attempted in the past. The security directive signed by Mr. Reagan in November called for a "selective number" of individuals in high levels with access to Governments secrets to undergo such tests.

After a vigorous protest by Mr. Shultz the White House said in a statement that such tests were "a limited, though sometimes useful tool when used in conjunction with other investigative and security procedures in espionage cases."

Seeking Agreement

Officials said that there was some concern that the directive left it up to individual department and agencies to determine when such tests should be given. The latest recommendation would attempt to make the tests mandatory for all parts of Government, they said.